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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER BORIS NEMTSOV REJOINS  
THE POLITICAL FRAY, BUT KREMLIN PRESSURE LIKELY

Classified By: A/POL Bruce Donahue. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Boris Nemtsov, erstwhile co-leader of the Union of Right Forces (SPS), will head an SPS committee charged with forging a permanent alliance among democratic opposition forces. News of the appointment came January 28, just a day before GOR officials charged Nemtsov's former business partner, Igor Linshits, President of the Neftyanoy Bank, with illegal business practices and money laundering. Nemtsov told us the campaign against Neftyanoy was a clear warning from the Kremlin to avoid engaging in political activities. Undaunted thus far, Nemtsov acknowledged that the task of uniting the democratic opposition would be difficult in the face of continued Kremlin pressure. From another corner of the democratic camp, Konstantin Lazarev of the Our Choice political council, told us separately that it was increasingly likely that his beleaguered party would throw in its lot with former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov.  
END SUMMARY.

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NEMTSOV PICKS UP THE POLITICAL GAUNTLET AGAIN  
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2. (C) Boris Nemtsov, erstwhile co-leader of the SPS, former Deputy Prime Minister during the Yeltsin era and, more recently, advisor to Ukraine President Viktor Yushchenko, has agreed to head an SPS committee tasked with exploring options for uniting democratic opposition forces. A senior official from Yabloko welcomed the announcement but otherwise the news failed to generate any significant media interest. In a January 30 meeting, Nemtsov acknowledged to us that the effort would be difficult but outlined a basic strategy he thought would resonate positively among Russians. In his view, the democrats' message had been too negative. In particular, democrats had been far too critical of President Putin, whom the great majority of Russians genuinely admired and respected. Although Nemtsov claimed that the democratic opposition collectively might be able to garner 15-20 percent in popular support despite its negative message, he theorized that it could increase this figure substantially with an ambitious, attention-grabbing program that did not directly attack the government or senior officials. Nemtsov said his fundamental challenge was to persuade other opposition members to "think big."

3. (C) As part of the opposition's alternative program, Nemtsov said he wanted to advance a pro-EU, pro-NATO course for the country, including eventual membership in both organizations, while also espousing a strategy that dealt with many of the anxieties of average Russians, including fear of Islamic extremism (but not Muslims in general) and Chinese encroachments upon Russia's economic and, perhaps, territorial interests. Such a program reflected the pro-Western outlook of most Russians, as well as their desire to be perceived as a respected member of the European

community. The key, Nemtsov argued, was to present this strategy as the only viable choice for Russia. Even if Russia did not join the EU or NATO in the next 15 years, he reasoned, the country would undergo significant, positive change as it moved toward these goals. He cited the example of Turkey as a nation that had transformed itself in its quest to become a member of the EU.

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KREMLIN UNLIKELY TO AGREE WITH PRO-WESTERN APPROACH  
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14. (C) Nemtsov said Kremlin officials would oppose this tack and would continue to apply pressure more broadly on him and his associates. He recounted events surrounding a raid on the Neftyanoy Bank in mid-December, which he described as a Kremlin warning to the bank's principal officers, including Nemtsov and Igor Linshits, to avoid engaging in political activities. Nemtsov said 200 personnel had been involved in the raid. He had immediately telephoned Vladislav Surkov, Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration (PA), who initially indicated that the raid's purpose was strictly law enforcement. However, according to Nemtsov, Surkov called back a few days later to say that the incident was "political" because of Nemtsov's association with liberal political figures, including Yushchenko. In response to Surkov's suggestion that Nemtsov's resignation from his post as bank director would "help resolve the case," Nemtsov resigned from the position, mainly to protect Linshits and the bank from prosecution.

15. (C) Nonetheless, the GOR subsequently filed charges against Linshits for illegal business practices and money laundering. Nemtsov told us Linshits had taken refuge temporarily in Munich but would probably wind up in Israel to

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avoid extradition. Nemtsov added that in a January 25 meeting Surkov had given no hint that charges against Linshits would be filed. He said he believed that Surkov's PA colleague, Igor Sechin, had given the orders for the campaign against Neftyanoy, but he declined to say how or why he thought so.

16. (C) Speaking more broadly on Kremlin affairs, Nemtsov:

-- Described Putin as competent but paranoid. The President was not concerned about domestic issues since virtually all opposition in the country had been eliminated. The business community, too, was "tamed" and obedient to the Kremlin. Putin paid considerable attention to global public opinion, but he relied on his close, personal relationships with world leaders, including President George Bush, to mitigate criticism, as well as to avoid taking action unless absolutely forced.

-- Concluded that the British were chosen as the focus of the recent spy scandal because of HMG's refusal to extradite businessman and political activist Boris Berezovskiy and Chechen envoy Akhmed Zakayev. Putin had pleaded for their extradition in a meeting last October with PM Tony Blair, promising "anything in return."

-- Speculated that the Kremlin would step up pressure against Rodina and its leader, Dmitriy Rogozin. Putin was genuinely concerned about the rise of nationalism and xenophobia in the country and recognized the attraction -- and danger -- of popular themes like "Russia for the Russians" and "Kill All the Oligarchs." Putin viewed Rogozin as a charismatic opponent who was capable of exploiting such sentiments successfully. Although the Kremlin had created Rodina, it could also destroy it.

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OUR CHOICE FALLS ON HARD TIMES  
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17. (C) Elsewhere in the democratic opposition ranks, the Our Choice party is struggling to remain intact, according to a member of the party's national political council, Konstantin Lazarev. He told us last week that the party, with an estimated current membership of 40,000, might not succeed in meeting the minimum membership requirements for registration.

Lazarev said Our Choice was considering joining forces with former PM Mikhail Kasyanov in a move that, among other things, would take advantage of the close ties between Kasyanov and party leader Irina Khakamada. He added that Our Choice possessed a superior organizational network, particularly outside of Moscow, that would benefit Kasyanov.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) It is not inconceivable that the raid on Neftyanoy was indeed part of the GOR's campaign to clean up dirty banks. If, however, Nemtsov is correct in his assessment of the political motivation behind the Neftyanoy campaign, he would join a growing list of personalities targeted by the Kremlin mainly for their political activities -- Berezovskiy, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovskiy, and Kasyanov. In addition to the effect such pressure has on Nemtsov's personal and business interests, it will likely torpedo Nemtsov's effort to unite the democratic opposition even before it has a chance to get underway.

19. (C) Nemtsov also realizes that his association with the Yeltsin era will probably limit support for any initiative with his name on it, and he is counting on the next generation of politicians to carry the liberal banner. Among them is his own daughter, who competed in the Moscow Duma election last December and was selected along with other young politicians and activists to meet with visiting German Chancellor Angela Merkel last month.

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